

Edith Cowan University

Research Online

ECU Publications Post 2013

1-1-2019

From rivers to confetti: Reconfigurations of time through new media narratives

Laura Glitsos

Edith Cowan University, laura.glitsos@ecu.edu.au

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecuworkspost2013>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Glitsos, L. (2019). From rivers to confetti: Reconfigurations of time through new media narratives. *M/C Journal*, 22(6). <http://www.journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/issue/view/time>

This Journal Article is posted at Research Online.

<https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecuworkspost2013/7608>

M/C Journal, Vol 22, No 6 (2019)

From Rivers to Confetti: Reconfigurations of Time through New Media Narratives

Laura Glitsos

Abstract

Introduction

In the contemporary West, experiences of time are shaped by—and inextricably linked to—the nature of media production and consumption. In Derrida and Steigler's estimation, teletechnologies bring time "into play" and thus produce time as an "artifact", that is, a knowable product (3). How and why time becomes "artificially" produced, according to these thinkers, is a result of the various properties of media production; media ensure that "gestures" (which can be understood here as the cultural moments marked as significant in some way, especially public ones) are registered. Being so, time is constrained, "formatted, initialised" by the matrix of the media system (3). Subsequently, because the media apparatus undergirds the Western imaginary, so too, the media apparatus undergirds the Western concept of time. We can say, in the radically changing global mediascape then, digital culture performs and generates ontological shifts that rewrite the relationship between media, time, and experience. This point lends itself to the significance of the role of both new media *platforms* and new media *texts* in reconfiguring understandings between past, present, and future timescapes.

There are various ways in which new media texts and platforms work upon experiences of time. In the following, I will focus on just one of these ways: narrativity. By examining a 'new media' text, I elucidate how new media narratives imagine timescapes that are constructed through metaphors of 'confetti' or 'snow', as opposed to more traditional lineal metaphors like 'rivers' or 'streams' (see Augustine Sedgwick's "Against Flows" for more critical thinking on the relationship between history, narrative, and the 'flows' metaphor). I focus on the revisioning of narrative structure in the Netflix series *The Haunting of Hill House* (2018) from its original form in the 1959 novel by Shirley Jackson. The narrative revisioning from the novel to the televisual both demonstrates and manifests emergent conceptualisations of time through the creative play of temporal multi-flows, which are contemporaneous yet fragmented.

The first consideration is the shift in textual format. However, the translocation of the narrative from a novel to a televisual text is important, but not the focus here. Added to this, I deliberately move toward a "general narrative analysis" (Cobley 28), which has the advantage of focusing on

mechanisms which may be integral to linguistically or visually-based genres without becoming embroiled in parochial questions to do with the 'effectiveness' of given modes, or the relative 'value' of different genres. This also allows narrative analysis to track the development of a specified process as well as its embodiment in a range of generic and technological forms. (Cobley 28)

It should be also be noted from the outset that I am not suggesting that fragmented narrative constructions and representations were never imagined or explored prior to this new media age. Quite the contrary if we think of Modernist writers such as Virginia Woolf (Lodwick; Hagglund). Rather, it is to claim that this abstraction is emerging in the mainstream entertainment media in greater contest with the dominant and more historically entrenched version of 'time as a construct' that is characterised through Realist narratology as linear and flowing only one way. As I will explore below, the reasons for this are largely related to shifts in everyday media consumption brought about by digital culture.

There are two reasons why I specifically utilise Netflix's series *The Haunting of Hill House* as a fulcrum from which to lever arguments about new media and the contemporary experience of time. First, as a web series, it embodies some of the pertinent conventions of the digital media landscape, both diegetically and *also* through practices of production and consumption by way of new time-shifting paradigms (see Leaver). I focus on the former in this article, but the latter is fruitful ground for critical consideration. For example, Netflix itself, as a platform, has somewhat destabilised normative temporal routines, such as in the case of 'binge-watching' where audiences 'lose' time similarly to gamblers in the casino space. Second, the fact that there are two iterations of the same story—one a novel and one a televisual text—provide us with a comparative benchmark from which to make further assertions about the changing nature of media and time from the mid-century to a post-millennium digital mediascape. Though it should be noted, my discussion will focus on the nature and quality of the *contemporary* framework, and I use the 1959 novel as a frame of reference only rather than examining its rich tapestry in its own right (for critique on the novel itself, see Wilson; see Roberts).

Media and the Production of Time-Sense

There is a remarkable canon of literature detailing the relationship between media and the production of time, which can help us place this discussion in a theoretical framework. I am limited by space, but I will engage with some of the most pertinent material to set out a conceptual map. Markedly, from here, I refer to the Western experience of time as a "time-sense" following E.P. Thompson's work (80). Following Thompson's language, I use the term "time-sense" to refer to "our inward notation of time", characterised by the rhythms of our "technological conditioning" systems, whether those be the forces of labour, media, or otherwise (80). Through the textual analysis of *Hill House* to follow, I will offer ways in which the technological conditioning of the new media system both constructs and shapes time-sense in terms related to a constellation of moments, or, to use a metaphor from the Netflix series itself, like "confetti" or "snow" ("Silence Lay Steadily").

However, in discussing the production of time-sense through new media mechanisms, note that time-sense is not an abstraction but is still linked to our understandings of the literal nature of time-space. For example, Alvin Toffler explains that, in its most simple construction, "Time can be conceived as the intervals during which events occur" (21). However, we must be reminded that events must first occur *within the paradigm of experience*. That is to say that matters of 'duration' cannot be unhinged from the experiential or phenomenological accounts of those durations, or in Toffler's words, in an echo of Thompson, "Man's [*sic*] perception of time is closely linked with his internal rhythms" (71). In the 1970s, Toffler commented upon the radical expansion of global systems of communications that produces the "twin forces of acceleration and transience", which "alter the texture of existence, hammering our lives and psyches into new and unfamiliar shapes" (18). This simultaneous 'speeding up' (which he calls acceleration) and sense of 'skipping' (which he calls transience) manifest in a range of modern experiences which disrupt temporal contingencies. Nearly two decades after Toffler, David Harvey commented upon the Postmodern's "total acceptance of ephemerality, fragmentation, discontinuity, and the chaotic" (44). Only a decade ago, Terry Smith emphasised that time-sense had become even more characterised by the "insistent presentness of multiple, often incompatible temporalities" (196). Netflix had not even launched in Australia and New Zealand until 2015, as well as a host of other time-shifting media technologies which have emerged in the past five years. As a result, it behooves us to reevaluate time-sense with this emergent field of production.

That being said, entertainment media have always impressed itself upon our understanding of temporal flows. Since the dawn of cinema in the late 19th century, entertainment media have been pivotal in constructing, manifesting, and illustrating time-sense. This has largely (but not exclusively) been in relation to the changing nature of narratology and the ways that narrative produces a sense of temporality. Helen Powell points out that the very earliest cinema, such as the Lumière Brothers' short films screened in Paris, did not embed narrative, rather, "the Lumières' actualities captured life as it happened with all its contingencies" (2). It is really only with the emergence of classical mainstream Hollywood that narrative became central, and with it new representations of "temporal flow" (2). Powell tells us that "the classical Hollywood narrative embodies a specific representation of temporal flow, rational and linear in its construction" reflecting "the standardised view of time introduced by the onset of industrialisation" (Powell 2). Of course, as media production and trends change, so does narrative structure. By the late 20th century, new approaches to narrative structure manifest in tropes such as 'the puzzle film,' as an example, which "play with audiences' expectations of conventional roles and storytelling through the use of the unreliable narrator and the fracturing of linearity. In doing so, they open up wider questions of belief, truth and reliability" (Powell 4). Puzzle films which might be familiar to the reader are *Memento* (2001) and *Run Lola Run* (1999), each playing with the relationship between time and memory, and thus experiences of contemporaneity. The issue of narrative in the construction of temporal flow is therefore critically linked to the ways that mediatic production of narrative, in various ways, reorganises time-sense more broadly. To examine this more closely, I now turn to Netflix's *The Haunting of Hill House*.

Narratology and Temporal Flow

Netflix's revision of *The Haunting of Hill House* reveals critical insights into the ways in which media manifest the nature and quality of time-sense. Of course, the main difference between the 1959 novel and the Netflix web series is the change of the textual format from a print text to a televisual text distributed on an Internet streaming platform. This change performs what Marie-Laure Ryan calls "transfictionality across media" (385). There are several models through which transfictionality might occur and thus transmogify textual and narrational parameters of a text. In the case of *The Haunting of Hill House*, the Netflix series follows the "displacement"

model, which means it “constructs essentially different versions of the protoworld, redesigning its structure and reinventing its story” (Doležel 206). For example, in the 2018 television remake, the protoworld from the original novel retains integrity in that it conveys the story of a group of people who are brought to a mansion called Hill House. In both versions of the protoworld, the discombobulating effects of the mansion work upon the group dynamics until a final break down reveals the supernatural nature of the house. However, in ‘displacing’ the original narrative for adaptation to the web series, the nature of the group is radically reshaped (from a research contingent to a nuclear family unit) and the events follow radically different temporal contingencies.

More specifically, the original 1959 novel utilises third-person limited narration and follows a conventional linear temporal flow through which events occur in chronological order. This style of storytelling is often thought about in metaphorical terms by way of ‘rivers’ or ‘streams,’ that is, flowing one-way and never repeating the same configuration (very much *unlike* the televisual text, in which some scenes are repeated to punctuate various time-streams). Sean Cubitt has examined the relationship between this conventional narrative structure and time sensibility, stating that

the chronological narrative proposes to us a protagonist who always occupies a perpetual present ... as a point moving along a line whose dimensions have however already been mapped: the protagonist of the chronological narrative is caught in a story whose beginning and end have already been determined, and which therefore constructs story time as the unfolding of destiny rather than the passage from past certainty into an uncertain future. (4)

I would map Cubitt’s characterisation onto the original *Hill House* novel as representative of a mid-century textual artifact. Although Modernist literature (by way of Joyce, Woolf, Eliot, and so forth) certainly ‘played’ with non-linear or multi-linear narrative structures, in relation to time-sense, Christina Chau reminds us that Modernity, as a general mood, was very much still caught up in the idea that “time that moves in a linear fashion with the future moving through the present and into the past” (26). Additionally, even though flashbacks are utilised in the original novel, they are revealed using the narrative convention of ‘memories’ through the inner dialogue of the central character, thus still occurring in the ‘present’ of the novel’s timescape and still in keeping with a ‘one-way’ trajectory. Most importantly, the original novel follows what I will call one ‘time-stream’, in that events unfold, and are conveyed through, one temporal flow.

In the Netflix series, there are obvious (and even cardinal) changes which reorganise the entire cast of characters as well as the narrative structure. In fact, the very process of returning to the original novel in order to produce a televisual remake says something about the nature of time-sense *in itself*, which is further sophisticated by the recognition of Netflix as a ‘streaming service’. That is, Netflix encapsulates this notion of ‘rivers-on-demand’ which overlap with each other in the context of the contemporaneous and persistent ‘now’ of digital culture. Marie-Laure Ryan suggests that “the proliferation of rewrites ... is easily explained by the sense of pastness that pervades Postmodern culture and by the fixation of contemporary thought with the textual nature of reality” (386). While the Netflix series remains loyal to the mood and basic premise (i.e., that there is a haunted house in which characters endure strange happenings and enter into psycho-drama), the series instead uses fractured narrative convention through which *three* time-streams are simultaneously at work (although one time-stream is embedded in another and therefore its significance is ‘hidden’ to the viewer until the final episode), which we will examine now.

The Time-Streams of *Hill House*

In the Netflix series, the central time-stream is, at first, ostensibly located in the characters’ ‘present’. I will call this time-stream A. (As a note to the reader here, there are spoilers for those who have not watched the Netflix series.) The viewer assumes they are, from the very first scene, following the ‘present’ time-stream in which the characters are adults. This is the time-stream in which the series opens, however, only for the first minute of viewing. After around one minute of viewing time, we already enter into a second time-stream. Even though both the original novel and the TV series begin with the same dialogue, the original novel continues to follow one time-stream, while the TV series begins to play with contemporaneous action by manifesting a second time-stream (following a series of events from the characters past) running in parallel action to the first time-stream. This narrative revisioning resonates with Toffler’s estimation of shifting nature of time-sense in the later twentieth century, in which he cites that

indeed, not only do contemporary events radiate instantaneously—now we can be said to be feeling the impact of all past events in a new way. For the past is doubling back on us. We are caught in what might be called a ‘time skip’. (16)

In its ‘displacement’ model, the *Hill House* televisual remake points to this ongoing fascination with, and re-actualisation of, the exaggerated temporal discrepancies in the experience of contemporary everyday life. The Netflix *Hill House* series constructs a dimensional timescape in which the timeline ‘skips’ back and forth (not only for the viewer but also the characters), and certain spaces (such as the Red Room) are only permeable to some characters at certain times.

If we think about Toffler’s words here—a doubling back, or, a time-skip—we might be pulled toward ever more recent incarnations of this effect. In Helen Powell’s investigation of the relationship between narrative and time-sense, she insists that “new media’s temporalities offer up the potential to challenge the chronological mode of temporal experience” (152). Sean Cubitt proposes that with the intensification of new media “we enter a certain, as yet inchoate, mode of time. For all the boasts of instantaneity, our actual relations with one another are mediated and as such subject to delays: slow downloads, periodic crashes, cache clearances and software uploads” (10). Resultingly, we have myriad temporal contingencies running at any one time—some slow, frustrating, mundane, in ‘real-time’ and others rapid to the point of instantaneous, or even able to pull the past into the present (through the endless trove of archived media on the web) and again into other mediatic dimensions such as virtual reality. To wit, Powell writes that “narrative, in mirroring these new temporal relations must embody fragmentation, discontinuity and incomplete resolution” (153). Fragmentation, discontinuity, and incompleteness are appropriate ways to think through the *Hill House*’s narrative revision and the ways in which it manifests some of these time-sensibilities.

The notion of a ‘time-skip’ is an appropriate way to describe the transitions between the three temporal flows occurring simultaneously in the *Hill House* televisual remake. Before being comfortably seated in any one time-stream, the viewer is translocated into a second time-stream that runs parallel to it (almost suggesting a kind of parallel dimension). So, we begin with the characters as adults and then almost immediately, we are also watching them as children with the rapid emergence of this second time-stream. This ‘second time-stream’ conveys the events of ‘the past’ in which the central characters are children, so I will call this time-stream B. While time-stream B conveys the scenes in which the characters are children, the scenes are not necessarily in chronological order.

The third time-stream is the *spectral-stream*, or time-stream C. However, the viewer is not fully aware that there is a totally separate time stream at play (the audience is made to think that this time-stream is the product of mere ghost-sightings). This is until the final episode, which completes the narrative ‘puzzle’. That is, the third time-stream conveys the events which are occurring *simultaneously in both of the two other time-streams*. In a sense, time-stream C, the spectral stream, is used to collapse the ontological boundaries of the former two time-streams. Throughout the early episodes, this time-stream C weaves in and out of time-streams A and B, like an *intrusive* time-stream (intruding upon the two others until it manifests on its own in the final episode). Time-stream C is used to create a ‘puzzle’ for the viewer in that the viewer does not fully understand its total significance until the puzzle is completed in the final episode. This convention, too, says something about the nature of time-sense as it shifts and mutates with mediatic production. This echoes back to Powell’s discussion of the ‘puzzle’ trend, which, as I note earlier, plays with “audiences’ expectations of conventional roles and storytelling through the use of the unreliable narrator and the fracturing of linearity” which serves to “open up wider questions of belief, truth and reliability” (4). Similarly, the skipping between three time-streams to build the *Hill House* puzzle manifests the ever-complicating relationships of time-management experiences in everyday life, in which pasts, presents, and futures impinge upon one another and interfere with each other.

Critically, in terms of plot, time-stream B (in which the characters are little children) opens with the character Nell as a small child of 5 or 6 years of age. She *appears* to have woken up from a nightmare about The Bent Neck Lady. This vision traumatises Nell, and she is duly comforted in this scene by the characters of the eldest son and the father. This provides crucial exposition for the viewer: We are told that these ‘visitations’ from The Bent Neck Lady are a recurring trauma for the child-Nell character. It is important to note that, while these scenes may be mistaken for simple memory flashbacks, it becomes clearer throughout the series that this time-stream is *not* tied to any one character’s memory but is a separate storyline, though critical to the functioning of the other two. Moreover, the Bent Neck Lady recurs as both (apparent) nightmares and waking visions throughout the course of Nell’s life. It is in Episode Five that we realise why.

The reason why The Bent Neck Lady always appears to Nell is that *she is Nell*. We learn this at the end of Episode Five when the storyline finally conveys how Nell dies in the House, which is by hanging from a noose tied to the mezzanine in the Hill House foyer. As Nell drops from the mezzanine attached to this noose, her neck snaps—she is The Bent Neck Lady. However, Nell does not just drop to the end of the noose. She continues to drop five more times *back into the other two time-streams*. Each time Nell drops, she drops into a different moment in time (and each time the neck snapping is emphasised). The first drop she appears to herself in a

basement. The second drop she appears to herself on the road outside the car while she is with her brother. The third is during (what we have been told) is a kind of sleep paralysis. The fourth and fifth drops she appears to herself as the small child on two separate occasions—both of which we witness with her in the first episode. So not only is Nell journeying through time, the audience is too. The viewer follows Nell's journey through her 'time-skip'. The result of the staggered but now conjoined time-streams is that we come to realise that Nell is, in fact, haunting herself—and the audience now understands they have followed this throughout not as a ghost-sighting but as a 'future' time-stream impinging on another.

In the final episode of season one, the siblings are confronted by Ghost-Nell in the Red Room. This is important because it is in this Red Room through which all time-streams coalesce. The Red Room exists dimensionally, cutting across disparate spaces and times—it is the spatial representation of the spectral time-stream C. It is in this final episode, and in this spectral dimension, that all the three time-streams collapse upon each other and complete the narrative 'puzzle' for the viewer. The temporal flow of the spectral dimension, time-stream C, interrupts and interferes with the temporal flow of the former two—for both the characters in the text *and* viewing audience.

The collapse of time-streams is produced through a strategic dialogic structure. When Ghost-Nell appears to the siblings in the Red Room, her first line of dialogue is a non-sequitur. Luke emerges from his near-death experience and points to Nell, to which Nell replies: "I feel a little clearer just now. We have. All of us have" ("Silence Lay Steadily"). Nell's dialogue continues but, eventually, she returns to the same statement, almost like she is running through a cyclic piece of text. She states again, "We have. All of us have." However, this time around, the phrase is pre-punctuated by Shirley's claim that she feels as though she had been in the Red Room before. Nell's dialogue and the dialogue of the other characters *suddenly align in synchronicity*. The audience now understands that Nell's very first statement, "We have. All of us have" is actually a response to the statement that Shirley had not yet made. This narrative convention emphasises the 'confetti-like' nature of the construction of time here. Confetti is, after all, sheets of paper that have been cut into pieces, thrown into the air, and then fallen out of place. Similarly, the narrative makes sense as a whole but feels cut into pieces and realigned, if only momentarily. When Nell then loops back through the same dialogue, it finally appears in synch and thus makes sense. This signifies that the time-streams are now merged.

The Ghost of Nell has travelled through (and in and out of) each separate time-stream. As a result, Ghost-Nell understands the nature of the Red Room—it manifests a slippage of timespace that each of the siblings had entered during their stay at the Hill House mansion. It is with this realisation that Ghost-Nell explains:

Everything's been out of order. Time, I mean. I thought for so long that time was like a line, that ... our moments were laid out like dominoes, and that they ... fell, one into another and on it went, just days tipping, one into the next, into the next, in a long line between the beginning ... and the end.

But I was wrong. It's not like that at all. Our moments fall around us like rain. Or... snow. Or confetti. ("Silence Lay Steadily")

This brings me to the titular concern: The emerging abstraction of time as a mode of layering and fracturing, a mode performed through this analogy of 'confetti' or 'snow'. The Netflix *Hill House* revision rearranges time constructs so that any one moment of time may be accessed, much like scrolling back and forth (and in and out) of social media feeds, Internet forums, virtual reality programs and so forth. Each moment, like a flake of 'snow' or 'confetti' litters the timespace matrix, making an infinite tapestry that exists dimensionally. In the Hill House narrative, all moments exist simultaneously and accessing each moment at any point in the time-stream is merely a process of perception.

Conclusion

Netflix is optimised as a 'streaming platform' which has all but ushered in the era of 'time-shifting' predicated on geospatial politics (see Leaver). The current media landscape offers instantaneity, contemporaneity, as well as, arbitrary boundedness on the basis of geopolitics, which Tama Leaver refers to as the "tyranny of digital distance". Therefore, it is fitting that Netflix's revision of the *Hill House* narrative is preoccupied with time as well as spectrality. Above, I have explored just some of the ways that the televisual remake plays with notions of time through a diegetic analysis.

However, we should take note that even in its production and consumption, this series, to quote Graham Meikle and Sherman Young, is embedded within "the current phase of television [that] suggests contested continuities" (67). Powell problematises the time-sense of this media apparatus further by reminding us that "there are three layers of temporality contained within any film image: the time of registration (production); the time of narration (storytelling); and the time of its consumption (viewing)" (3-4). Each of these aspects produces what Althusser and Balibar have called a "peculiar time", that is, "different levels of the whole as developing 'in the same historical time' ... relatively autonomous and hence relatively independent, even in its dependence, of the 'times' of the other levels" (99). When we think of the *layers upon layers* of different time 'signatures' which converge in Hill House as a textual artifact—in its production, consumption, distribution, and diegesis—the nature of contemporary time reveals itself as complex but also fleeting—hard to hold onto—much like snow or confetti.

References

- Althusser, Louis, and Étienne Balibar. *Reading Capital*. London: NLB, 1970.
- Cobley, Paul. *Narrative*. Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2013.
- Cubitt, S. "Spreadsheets, Sitemaps and Search Engines." *New Screen Media: Cinema/Art/Narrative*. Eds. Martin Rieser and Andrea Zapp. London: BFI, 2002. 3-13.
- Derrida, Jacques, and Bernard Stiegler. *Echographies of Television: Filmed Interviews*. Massachusetts: Polity Press, 2002.
- Doležel, Lubomir. *Heterocosmica: Fiction and Possible Worlds*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1999.
- Häggglund, Martin. *Dying for Time: Proust, Woolf, Nabokov*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2012.
- Hartley, Lodwick. "Of Time and Mrs. Woolf." *The Sewanee Review* 47.2 (1939): 235-241.
- Harvey, David. *Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1989.
- Jackson, Shirley. *The Haunting of Hill House*. New York: Viking, 1959.
- Laurie-Ryan Marie. "Transfictionality across Media." *Theorizing Narrativity*. Eds. John Pier, García Landa, and José Angel. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008. 385-418.
- Leaver, Tama. "Watching Battlestar Galactica in Australia and the Tyranny of Digital Distance." *Media International Australia* 126 (2008): 145-154.
- Meikle, George, and Sherman Young. "Beyond Broadcasting? TV For the Twenty-First Century." *Media International Australia* 126 (2008): 67-70.
- Powell, Helen. *Stop the Clocks! Time and Narrative in Cinema*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2012.
- Roberts, Brittany. "Helping Eleanor Come Home: A Reassessment of Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*." *The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies* 16 (2017): 67-93.
- Smith, Terry. *What Is Contemporary Art?* Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2009.
- The Haunting of Hill House*. Mike Flanagan. Amblin Entertainment, 2018.
- Thompson, E.P. "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism." *Past and Present* 38.1 (1967): 56-97.
- Toffler, Alvin. *Future Shock*. New York: Bantam Books, 1971.
- Wilson, Michael T. "'Absolute Reality' and the Role of the Ineffable in Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*." *Journal of Popular Culture* 48.1 (2015): 114-123.